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ABSTRACT

As part of a continuing program designed to provide Nevada's school population with information that will facilitate greater awareness and understanding of both past and present Native Nevadan lifestyles and contributions, this generalized curriculum guide might constitute a social studies unit on religion for upper elementary and/or junior high schools. Subject areas covered are: (1) Early Religion of Desert Culture Indians (focus on the Shaman and the nature of good and evil); (2) The Ghost Dance Religion (a response to the intrusion and the physical and cultural destruction brought about by the white man with the discovery of gold and silver in 1848 and 1857); and (3) The Peyote Religion (development of a Narcotic based Christian/pagan religion identified as..."a strong defense of Indian culture and identity and an avenue between Indian and White cultures"). Accompanying the narrative are a word study list (40 words) and a Nevada map, delineating county boundaries and the historical territories of the Washoe, Northern and Southern Paiute, and Shoshonean Indian tribes. The word study list includes such words as moral, supernatural, ceremony, manipulate, impact, interpret, narcotic, and reliable. (JC)

INDIANS OF NEVADA

by

HELEN DUNN

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FOREWORD

The Nevada State Department of Education is pleased to be able to publish this series as part of a continuing program of information on Nevada Indians.

This program is designed to provide Nevada's school population with information in order that they may have a greater awareness and understanding of the lifestyle, past and present, as well as the contributions made by the Native-Nevadans.

No attempt has been made to edit or alter the author's original manuscripts.

Chas. H. Poehlman, Consultant
(Indian Education)

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ABOUT

HELEN DUNN

A native of Leadville, Colorado, she came to Goldfield, Nevada, when a baby. There she went through the school system, and graduated from Esmeralda County High School with high honors.

She is a graduate of the University of Nevada, specializing in history and received a B.A. An M.A. degree in Journalism was received from the University of Colorado.

She taught in Goldfield High School and in Reno's Billinghurst Junior High School.

Helen Dunn has long been identified with the study of Nevada. She fostered such a study at Billinghurst, where a section of the school's library is known as the Helen M. Dunn Nevada History Library.

She has written several Nevada booklets which will be published by the Nevada State Department of Education.

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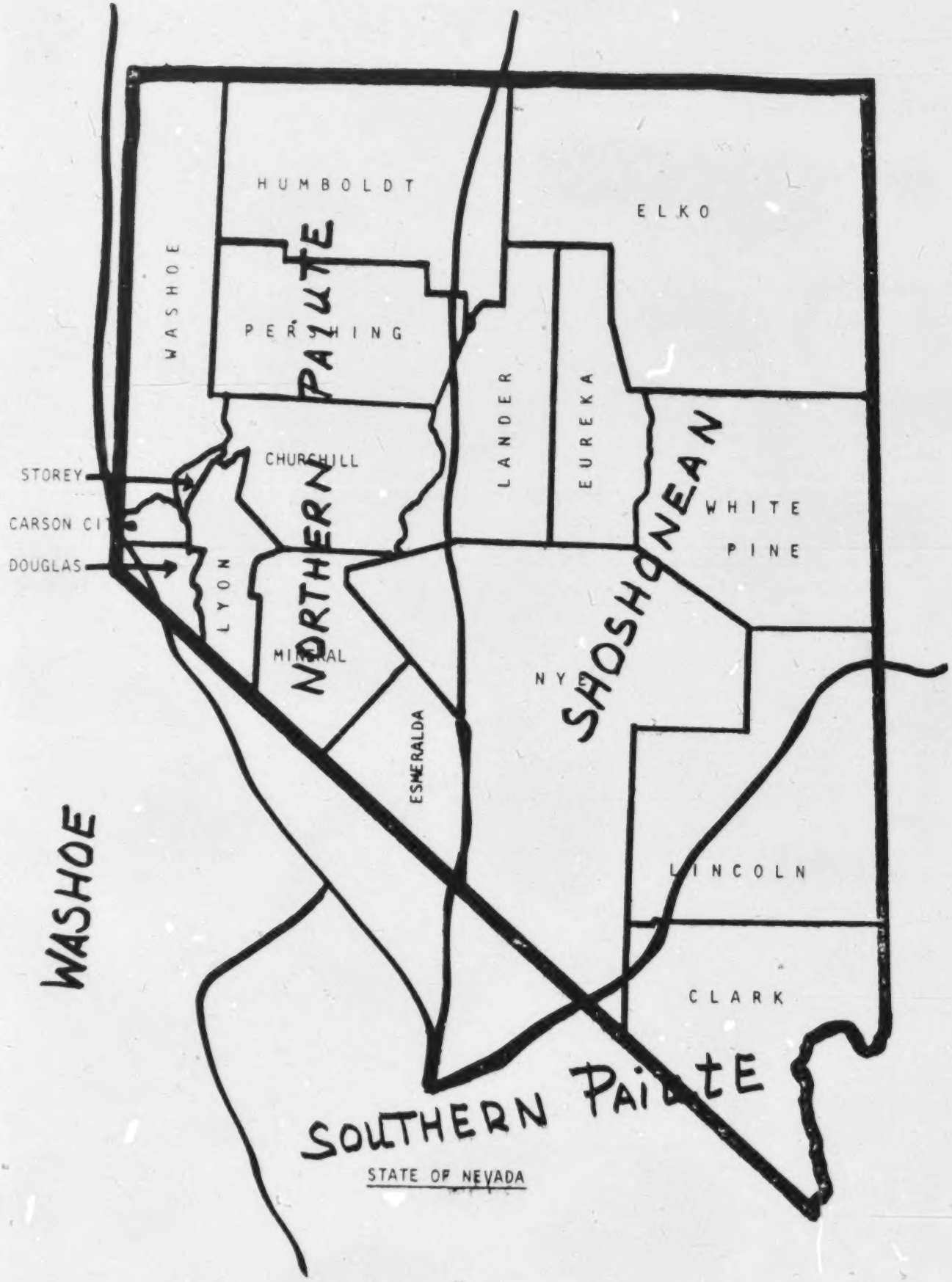
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ESMERALDA
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CLARK
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NORTHERN PAIUTE
SHOSHONEAN
SOUTHERN PAIUTE
STATE OF NEVADA

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EARLY RELIGION OF DESERT CULTURE INDIANS

According to studies made of the early Indians of the Great Basin, it was learned that they saw God in all of nature. Some of this they could not understand or control, such as the thunder and lightning of violent storms. The strength of sweeping wind, the change in the amount of food to be found in plant life or in animals to kill presented puzzles to them. They, therefore, felt nature was taken over by great powers, some kind to them and some evil and cruel causing suffering and death.

Among beliefs of these early people were those that animals had supernatural powers and could assume human form and behavior. The wolf and the coyote were, perhaps, the most common of these. The wolf, they thought, could assume the role of a wise one helping and benefiting man. The coyote, on the other hand, was a mischievous trickster who upset the wolf's plans.

These early people believed that many powers were given to them by their dreams. Some of these powers were for his good, but some were evil. If it was the latter (evil), he would try to resist its call and wait for the power of good things. According to their ideas, good powers given to them by their dreams included that of curing. In their dreams they were taught the special songs to sing for curing the sick. In their dreams they were told where to find and get the tobacco and the feathers to use in the curing ceremony. This was, thus, the way a man became a Shaman. (Women could become curers, but they did not have the power and respect as did the Shamans.)

It has been pointed out that the Shaman doctored his patient for four or five nights. In his ritual or ceremony, he used his rattle of cocoons or deer hoofs, singing songs of power, using tobacco in his clay pipe as an incense. He also used a whistle of eagle bone and feathers from the eagle or magpie.

With the aid of these instruments of "magic", he would try with his special power to get to the evil substance inside the patient's body which was the cause of the illness. Manipulating the body into the proper position, he would force or suck out the evil and so effect a cure.

The Shaman had power, according to study, to cure burns or snakebites. They were paid for their work, in addition to respect and honor, with food, baskets, and buckskin. However, if the cure was not completely successful, the Shaman returned part of the payment.

The Shaman of the Desert Culture did his share of the Indian's group work, just as everyone else did. He was called upon to do his special task of "curing" only in the case of an illness striking a member of the family group. A note of interest tells that, if the Shaman lost too many patients, he was thought to be using evil powers and, thus, was killed by the group.

Today, Shamans of the old traditional type are almost unknown. The modern Indian uses the medicine of today.

THE GHOST DANCE RELIGION

With the California gold discovery in 1848, and the Nevada silver discovery in 1857, the life of the Indian of the Great Basin region was totally disrupted. Miners and ranchers swarmed over the land. Pinon trees (the nut of which was the Indian staff of life) were cut down for firewood. The land the Indians called home was occupied by ranchers and their cattle. The traditional life cycle of the Indians was destroyed. The Indian resistance was ended by the large number of whites and their superior weapons.

In 1859, the railroad was completed and, in 1864, Nevada became the 36th state. Some of the Indians were placed on reservations, others were allowed to live in colonies and to work on ranches, around the mines, or at jobs in the towns. The old way of life for the Indian was shattered.

With this intrusion into the Indian's plan of life, small religious cults began to appear. These, studies show, were an attempt to reorganize their lives (changed by the impact and demands of the white man's culture.).

One of these religious movements was the Ghost Dance which originated among the Northern Paiutes of the Walker Lake area. It is said to have started as a vision seen by Jack Wilson (Wovoka), a powerful Shaman of that region's Paiute tribe. (Wovoka's father had also been a Shaman who had had contact with earlier Shaman leaders such as Wodzievob and Weneyuga. These leaders had seen the advance stages of the whites' coming, as well as the dislocation of the Indians' life).

Jack Wilson's vision gave him voice to the Shamans before him (now in the spirit world) who told him to instruct his people to love one another and to have feelings of peace toward the white man. The vision told him to tell his people to return to their old ways, to dance their traditional circle dance, and to sing their old songs all night long for five nights. The vision told him to tell his people that, if they followed these instructions, all the dead Indians would return; that, at the same time, all the white people would disappear, and that the wholeness of their Indian life would return. Thus, according to Wovoka, the vision said there was no need to kill the whites.

The dream of Wovoka spread to neighboring tribes, such as the Washo, and into California and Oregon. In each group, the ceremony was carried out by the group's way of life. Because no new prophets came along to reinterpret the dream or vision, disappointment and disillusionment became evident and the Ghost Dance failed.

Although the Ghost Dance originated in the Great Basin, it was taken up even by the Sioux. They, however, changed it into a war dance against the white man and used it in their last uprising against the United States Army.

A point to remember is that Wovoka's vision evidenced and strengthened the ties among all Indian peoples. It laid the basis for Indians to envision a fuller life if they participated in the world about them.

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THE PEYOTE RELIGION

You ask what is peyote? According to the dictionary, it is a desert plant of the cactus family and contains a narcotic used by Indians in religious ceremonies. Dating back, as far as 1560, its use spread from Mexico, and its use in religious ceremony has an element of Christianity (the two religions being absorbed by the Indians at the same time). It is said that its use spread into the Great Basin area in the 1920's and 1930's Today, its use in religious ceremony is the basis for a nationally organized and recognized unit known as the Native American Church.

The peyote religious ceremony gave the Indians pride in their ancient heritage before the coming of the white man. The peyote ceremony had in it some ethical code adopted from Christianity. The peyote ceremony taught the Indians a good and moral life. The peyote ceremony taught the Indians to believe in the brotherhood of all peoples, in the careful treatment of one's spouse, and in the caring for one's children. The peyote ceremony teaches its people to be reliable workers and to be non-alcoholic drinkers.

Despite opposition from high and powerful groups among white culture, the peyote ceremony (Peyotism) has grown to become an important Indian organization and a National church group (1944).

Peyotism has grown to become a strong defense of Indian culture and identify. It has grown to become an avenue between Indian and white cultures.

WORD STUDY

1. nature
2. violet
3. strength
4. puzzle
5. supernatural
6. assume
7. resist
8. ceremony
9. incense
10. magic

1. manipulate
2. patient
3. tradition
4. resistance
5. superior
6. reservations
7. intrusion
8. impact
9. vision
10. contact

1. interpret
2. evident
3. failure
4. uprising
5. participate
6. peyote
7. narcotic
8. element
9. absorb
10. basis

1. ancient
2. heritage
3. adopted
4. moral
5. spouse
6. reliable
7. despite
8. opposition
9. organization
10. defense

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